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COMMENTARY

By Nicholas von Hoffman

Now that the nation's throat has gulped on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of John Kennedy's murder, please excuse a few impolite noises emanating not from the heart but the bowel. If truth be told, the slain Kennedy owes as much to his killer as he did to his father and his father's money. Without Lee Harvey Oswald, J.F.K. would just be another nondescript, one-term President, standing in that palsied row of ancient former Chief Executives behind Bill Clinton on those occasions of state when political shades from the past are summoned to get a bill through Congress or manifest a mindless solidarity on behalf of free trade, the cocaine wars or another panacea du jour.

Whatever lasting celebrity Kennedy has been accorded, he can thank Oswald for it. Had he died a natural death from any of the things we've subsequently learned ailed him, he would be as profoundly unknown as William McKinley, who also was called the "martyred President" until the country forgot he'd ever existed. In historical importance, however, McKinley ranks a few notches higher than Kennedy: The former, after all, guided the United States to victory in a war that committed the nation to a course of internationalism it has scarcely deviated from since.

As an historic figure, Kennedy deserves to be ranked about on a par with James A. Garfield, who, in 1881, was also shot down by a madman. Neither President lived to accomplish much that was memorable and both men had mottled escutcheons. Garfield's reputation for financial probity was not the same after he was compromised by his role in the Crédit Mobilier railroad bond scandals. On the other hand, Garfield at least was a model husband and father, something not said of Kennedy.

Yet 30 years after Garfield's death, not even historians were paying him much mind. McKinley, who also met his death at the hands of a gun-wielding left-wing crackpot, was all but unknown by 1931, three decades after his murder. So why is Kennedy still hanging around to bother us?

The continuing intrusion of J.F.K.'s ghost into the world of the living is partially accounted for by the near-religious conviction held by many that his real killer has never been named or apprehended. The fact that no person with any plausible connection to the foul deed other than Oswald has ever surfaced has done nothing to discourage the belief that it was gunman (or gunmen) X, not Oswald, who pulled the trigger.

People haven't been able to swallow the idea that life is so crazy and so unpredictable that a psychotic jerk could buy himself a cheap gun and get off a couple of lucky shots, thereby ending the life of a handsome, glamorous young President. At least John Wilkes Booth, if not all his confederates in the conspiracy to murder Abraham Lincoln, was driven by emotions and motives on behalf of a cause we can understand if not approve. To this day, the mishmash inside Oswald's *cabeza* remains as incomprehensible as what impelled that other homicidal loony to murder John Lennon.

Lincoln truly was a martyred President, criminally slain by real political enemies in a real conspiracy. No matter how much of a tragedy, his death made sense and had meaning.

Kennedy's death didn't. It was as random an extinction of life as that of a bug getting zapped by the fumigator while other bugs get away. So the search for a rational killer, a murderer with a political motive, no matter how vile, is a way of refusing to accept that we human beings, even the greatest of us, die with the same predictability and for the same reasons as cockroaches. The thought that our comings and goings are so meaningless is too much to bear.

For the same reasons, perhaps, the deadly event itself has been invested with an overarching importance. The days after the assassination are called the time that television came of age, but that's certainly a modest observation. More grandiose ones are frequently mentioned. Over the last few weeks we've been told again and again that it was in November of 1963 that "America lost its innocence," although the metaphor seems absurd in our sexually licentious times. The murder and its aftermath are made equivalent to the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden. By this crime, we are asked to infer, a once-pure America was henceforth fated to wander and labor in pain, mystification and sin. It is said that the day Kennedy was murdered, America fell apart, morally at least, and we went to hell in a hand basket, as a rising generation of young idealists dropped into a state of cynicism and disbelief. The death of Kennedy is repeatedly described to us as the passage across a time line, an abrupt transition from a golden age to an epoch of dross.

Maybe so, but American social commentators have spent most of this century marking time lines and remarking on our lost innocence. It was said of the Great War, that disillusioning crusade of 1917-18; it was said again in the shock of the Depression and yet again after Pearl Harbor. In fact, it has been said so often that America figures to be a girl with an ever regenerating hymen who, ever revirginized, starts up again pure and unsullied, so that she may once more be violated by the tragedy of history.

Though we have had four murdered Presidents, only the day of Kennedy's assassination is recognized. After the deaths of the first three, a trade in mortuarial memorabilia sprang up, but it certainly didn't last for 30 years. Garfield and McKinley soon dropped out of memory because they didn't bulk large enough. Lincoln was a different story, remembered not for how and when he died but for who he was and what he did. For the author of the Emancipation Proclamation and the Gettysburg Address, his life, not his violent and untimely death, is what we fix on. For President John F. Kennedy, now chiefly remembered for the whores, tarts, strumpets, bimbos, actresses, casual office workers, trollops, bobbysoxers, hookers and rich society ladies he bedded, what else is there to fix on other than the time and manner of his demise?